

Meet Packbot: The newest recruit

Remote-controlled robot searches caves, transmits video

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"Packbot" is equipped with special wheels and the ability to remotely transmit images to soldiers.

From Nic Robertson
CNN

BAGRAM, Afghanistan (CNN) -- Dashing past waiting troops, a new ally in the battle against al Qaeda speeds forward -- "Packbot." It's the United States Army's first battlefield robot, intended to check the trails ahead and send back pictures.

Clearing caves and checking buildings are the main missions for the U.S. Army's latest recruit to the ranks at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan.

"I don't have to be anywhere near this cave," says Cpl. Robert Merritt, standing outside the opening. "By looking through (an) eye piece I ... can switch cameras so I can see exactly what I need to see."

Merritt's team is concerned about a wall that has been knocked down near the cave's entrance. But instead of sending a soldier into the risky situation, Packbot is able

to transmit images from inside the cave and let the unit know that it's safe to proceed.

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And while its battery packs leave it lacking the stamina of more able-bodied combatants, Packbot has been winning friends as it sends developments back to airbase technicians.

It's "a great addition," says Lt. Col. Ron Rose. "It's going to prove its worth ... I think we used it in cave exploration and I think there [are] quite a number of ways we can use it."



With the advent of the efficient Packbot, soldiers and scientists are mixing in an unconventional military approach in order to get the job done.

"The idea here was be quick," says Col. Bruce Jette, director of the robotics team. "This whole process from beginning to end is 90 days."





on terror in Afghanistan.
CNN's Nic Robertson reports
(August 1)

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Off-the-shelf products

Components for the \$45,000 Packbots are usually available commercially. "The way commercial, off-the-shelf products are developing now you really can't take that long, because once you get to a certain level the industry has bypassed you," says Maj. John Matlock, a member of the robotics team.

Ongoing projects with the two prototypes include fitting Packbot with guns, grenades, chemical-agent testing and more cameras.



"Packbot," the latest U.S. Army recruit, ventures into a cave in Afghanistan as soldiers look on.

Although no one in Afghanistan expects this new high-tech point man to replace combat troops any time soon, it seems the hunt for al Qaeda is giving this next generation of warrior an opportunity to get its feet -- or tracks -- on the battlefield.

The question is, will the name Packbot stick?

"This one's name is ... is it Fester?" Matlock wonders aloud.

"No, it's Hermes," prompts another soldier.

"This is Hermes," says Matlock.

Certainly it can be tough when they all look alike. Luckily, so far they don't have feelings.